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ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke's Dramatism, as a "meta-perspective," encourages a liberating awareness of the shortcomings of all rhetorics by upholding a "comic frame" that exhorts commitment without dogmatism, tolerance without uncritical relativism. Teachers of rhetoric can use a liberating comic frame that acknowledges the recalcitrance of the "real world," since it mediates between uncritical dogmatism and uncritical relativism. However, Dramatism can be oppressive if it is conceived of in terms of the "insight" it offers. In those terms, Dramatism is like a bank surveillance camera that "watches" and "points out" the oppressive transaction but is ill-suited to act to do something about it. An instructor worked with students at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, on ways of transforming the "bank" into a democratic space. Students set up a "grassroots" discussion group, which evolved into an alternative campus newspaper dedicated to the promotion of a democratic voice for the expression of alternative and historically marginalized voices. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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Teaching Rhetorical Studies: Dramatism As Liberator And Oppressor

by

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Teaching Rhetorical Studies: Dramatism As Liberator And Oppressor

Every teacher enters the classroom with a philosophy of education. Out of that philosophy will arise decisions as to how to plan for, teach, and evaluate the effectiveness of a course of study. Gronbeck (1990) argues that teachers of rhetorical studies, especially at the undergraduate level, have two major decisions to make:

> (a) how to broadly define "rhetoric" when theorizing and exemplifying rhetoric at work in society, and (b) to then adopt a series of pedagogical strategies, from traditional lecture to nontraditional observation projects, that are consistent with that definition. (101).

Suppose the teacher of rhetorical studies were to take Burke's Dramatism as a basis for classroom philosophy? Would such teaching have a liberating quality to it? This paper will argue "yes" and "no" to that question. That is, Dramatism as a "meta-perspective" encourages a liberating awareness of the shortcomings of all rhetorics. It does this through the upholding of a "comic frame" that exhorts commitment without dogmatism, tolerance without uncritical relativism. At the same time, if Dramatism is steeped in the assumptions of a mind conditioned by the written word ("logocentrism" for Derrida, see Chesebro, 1992), it may ultimately reinforce the "text bound mind" from which we are most in need of liberation. Part of the text-bound mind, as regards educational practices, is what Freire (1981) calls the "banking" model of

education. This paper will show that Dramatism oppresses if it can do no better than be the "surveillance camera" that watches what goes on in the bank but goes no further.

Dramatism and Classroom Practice

Let us take Gronbeck's advice and begin with a broad definition of rhetoric. In A Rhetoric of Motives (1950), Burke says that rhetoric is " . . . the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols." (43). Conscious of the limitation of traditional rhetoric as being concerned largely with public speeches, Burke consequently expanded the domain of rhetoric to include all human symbolic activity. Modern teachers of rhetorical studies have, for the most part, adopted broad definitions of rhetoric, thus allowing for a wider variety of texts to be selected for analysis (e.g. Sillars, 1992; Hart, 1990; Brock, Scott & Chesebro, 1990; Foss, 1989).

Rhetorical studies courses may generally be said to fall into four areas: rhetorical theory, rhetorical criticism, rhetorical history, and rhetorical pedagogy (Gronbeck, 1990). A Dramatistic philosophy of education offers benefits in each area.

Courses in rhetorical theory could begin with Burke's definition of human to identity symbol making and using as the core of the theoretical perspective to be taken. The overriding purpose of the course is to help discover "what it means to be the symbol making/using animal." As Dramatism is a "perspective on perspectives," it has the benefit of simultaneously encouraging a rhetoric-centered view of the world at the same time exposing the

rhetoric of other theories. Let's imagine a class, for example, in which Foss, Foss, and Trapp's (1991) Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric is selected as the primary text. The authors summarize the writings of eight authors (Richards, Weaver, Toulmin, Perelman, Grassi, Burke, Foucault, Habermas), and offer three challenges to the rhetorical tradition (feminist, Afrocentcric, Asian). The Dramatistic instructor is able to avoid dogmatic commitment to any of the perspectives or challenges, and instead create a discussion of the ways in which each "dance an attitude." Neil Postman, while not a Dramatistic theorist by reputation, has argued (1988) that social researchers ought to be looked at as "moral theologians," telling stories that argue a perspective into existence. Such a perspective is consistent with Dramatism, because it removes the awe associated with "science" and reveals the poetic roots of all social theory. Dramatists are not alone in looking at theory as a story, of course, yet Burke must be given credit for being one of the groundbreakers in this area.

A Dramatistically guided criticism is "logological." Burke's word-centered focus has of course served as the basis for numerous criticisms over the last several decades. But logology must be balanced by a theory of human nature. Chesebro's (1993) distinction between the ontological and epistemological functions of Burkean theory are useful here:

> . . . while functioning as different perspectives, the ontological and epistemic functions are not inconsistent for Burke. Ontological and epistemic perspectives mutually define symbol-using. The ontological addresses the question of what the nature of the human being as

> symbol-user is. The epistemic addresses the question of how human beings use and are used by symbols. For Burke, both questions must be addressed if a comprehensive view of symbol-using is to be provided. The ontological recognizes the literal nature of symbol-using and posits the ways in which human beings can be understood as symbol-using creatures; the epistemic accounts for the specific kinds of knowledge-inducing activity generated by symbol-using (147).

Burke scholars have traditionally given more weight to the epistemological side of Burke's theory, thus running the risk of Dramatism turning into a neo-Aristotleian "cookie-cutter." As Chesebro has argued, "if Burke's set of critical terminologies are perceived as solely epistemic, his system is aptly viewed as a kind of 'tool box' from which any scheme of concepts can be extracted for any purpose." (1993, 148). In other words, Burke's ontology (dramatism) is separated from his epistemology (logology) only at the risk of producing shallow theory and criticism that does justice neither to the Burkean system nor to the object(s) of criticism that Burke's terms may be used to investigate.

Theory and criticism lay the foundation for rhetorical history and pedagogy. Lentricchia (1993) argues that Burke's "true project" is not Dramatisim, but " . . . formulating, exploring, and making forays . . . the various acts of reading and writing history." (222). Lentricchia calls Burke a "comedic overseer" as regards the reading of history. That is, Burke avoids the standard practice of looking for a governing pattern of history that ultimately leads to the culmination of some a priori determined

purpose. Instead, as Lentricchia interprets him, Burke is actually engaged in a kind of Gramscian search for the ways in which "ruling classes" establish hegemony over the minds of the population at large.

As regards rhetorical pedagogy, defined here as how to teach students "effective communication" skills, dramatism provides a vocabulary that can be used in this manner. The problem with all theories of symbolic action, in my opinion, is that they can be too easily manipulated for "effective communication" purposes. Burke never provides much "how to" advice, nor did he ever write an "ethics" of rhetoric. Therefore, a teacher teaching "skills" from a Burkean framework ought to weigh the moral issues involved before using his theories in this way. If Burke is exposing hegemonic processes--what may also be called symbol misuse, it hardly behooves us as a field to encourage that sort of thing among students. To do such a thing is to rob Dramatism of its liberating qualities which are the topic of the next section of this paper.

Dramatism as Liberator: Comic Frame and Recalcitrance

Any notion of "education for liberation," it seems to me, would have to somehow promote intellectual independence. Part of the contemporary suspicion of "cookie cutter" criticism is the feeling that mere categorization does not necessarily shed understanding and/or insight on a rhetorical artifact. That is, we become too dependent on the critical categories and lose our capacity for <u>independent</u> evaluation.

One sign of an independent thinker is his or her refusal to lapse into uncritical dogma. Whether the dogma is based on a frame

of acceptance or rejection, the uncritical adherence to it is a kind of blindness. Burke's "comic frame" provides the way out. According to Hyman (1993):

> The name "comic" has refused many readers, principally through confusion with "comedy" . . . the name was probably chosen as Burke's ironic observation that being an accepter-rejecter in a world of ravening accepters and ravening rejecters is a pretty funny thing to be . . . whatever the source of the term, the attitude it represents is basic to Burke's values . . . it seems to connote not only "ironic," "humanistic," and "skeptical," but all the implications of truth emergent out of an agon in "dialectic" and "dramatistic" (29).

The danger of the comic frame is that, while it does mitigate against lapsing into an uncritical dogmatism, it can itself become an uncritical relativism.

How to avoid lapsing into uncritical relativism? In my judgement, Burke's notion of "recalcitrance" is useful here. Tompkins and Cheney (1993) argue that this area is one that was left underdeveloped by Burke:

> Much more needs to be said, especially in light of current philosophical debates, about Burke's treatment in Permanence and Change of "recalcitrance"-his term for the nonsymbolic world's intrusion and constraint upon (if not correction of) the symbolic world (230).

Brummett (1989) admits to being uncomfortable with the notion of recalcitrance, as "it would seem to make us posit a 'real' reality as opposed to a symbolic reality" (147), yet he finds himself

having to use the term to counter Professor Robert Ivie's (1989) somewhat uncritical acceptance of the Johnson Administration's claims about Vietnam. Brummett finds troubling the argument that it was primarily the vocabulary of Johnson that kept him from "'articulating America's vital interest in Vietnam . . .' What vital interest? Ivie writes as if there were some." (148).

The notion of recalcitrance, which I would argue is part of Burke's ontology because it deals with those parts of the "real world" that defy our linguistic manipulations, is a necessary corrective to the comic frame. Without it, Burkean theory and criticism could only be "liberating" if by that term we mean the most vulgar form of "I'm okay, you're okay" thinking that makes it difficult ever to work for any real socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes in the world.

Dramatism as Oppressor: The Bank Surveillance Camera Analogy

Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1981), in his classic Pedagogy of the Oppressed, exposed the workings of dogmatic, authoritarian educational practices. When students are conceived of as "containers" that are "filled" by the teacher, we have the "banking" concept of education:

> Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits . . . In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who

> consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (58).

Now, on the surface it may seem that Dramatism offers us a way out of the banking model. After all, Dramatism allows us to see the hierarchical motive in place and the symbol misuse employed to maintain the hierarchy.

On the other hand, Dramatism's role in ridding us of the "bank" is not entirely clear. That is, Dramatism and/or the Burkean critic can be conceived of as the surveillance camera in a bank. That camera can see the unjust practices taking place in the bank, it can even record them on tape so as to solve the crimes at a later date. However, the camera's very existence relies on the existence of the unjust banking system. How can a camera transform the banking system?

Part of the problem is the visual nature of Dramatism, or at least the visual interpretation of it. Its adherents seek "insight," at the same time they recognize that every insight leads to some kind of "blindness." Citing Bernard Lonergan's work, Walter Ong (1977) has demonstrated the reliance we have developed on visual as opposed to auditory or tactile analogues for knowing. Thus Dramatism as a "world view" is biased toward visually oriented culture. Ong argues that

> "the drive to consider intellectual knowing, which at its term is understanding, by analogy with vision responds to the need to 'formalize' intellectual knowledge, to give it definition, distinctness, edge, precision, clarity, qualities like those paramount in vision" (137).

Thus we can use Dramatism to "see" what is going on in the banking

transaction, but just our "seeing" it doesn't necessarily do anything to change it.

Perhaps what is needed is an attempt to replace the insight/blindness polarity with hearing/deafness. If we hear human beings, refusing to remain deaf, then we will by extension speak to them. In other words, we will no longer be like the camera watching the transaction. Instead, we will interrupt the transaction with our voices. This is the type of thing that Thompson and Palmeri (1993) had in mind with their notion of "poetic education, agitation, and advocacy" (280-283). A Burkean scholar ought to be "in the trenches," so to speak, "watching" the world not just to "point it out" to others but to work with others in changing it. To the extent that Dramatism relies on keeping "the bank" in place for its own existence, it becomes part of that oppressive system and is thus to be avoided by all progressive educators.

Conclusion

The teacher of Rhetorical Studies is in a position to influence the approach to the world taken by his or her students, peers, and others. A comic frame that acknowledges the recalcitrance of the "real world" is liberating because it mediates between uncritical dogmatism and uncritical relativism.

On the other hand, Dramatism can be oppressive if it is conceived of sheerly in terms of the "insight" it offers. Conceived of in those terms, Dramatism is like a bank surveillance camera that "watches" and "points out" the oppressive transaction but is perhaps ill-suited to perform an action to do something

about it.

At the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, a very conservative campus, this author has recently worked with some students on ways of transforming the "bank" into a democratic space. Burke's Dramatism allows anyone on the campus to see the "banking model" at work on our campus: student fear of authoritarian teachers and their grade weapon; non-tenured faculty afraid of their senior faculty and their renewal vote weapon; administrators afraid of the board of regents, and so on. Unfortunately, this type of academic scenario is all too common and it is probably not an exaggeration to say that every campus in the nation feels it to an extent.

I encouraged a group of students to set up a "grassroots" discussion group that would provide a space for the airing of any and all issues related to the campus. When this first started, the group could not think of anything to talk about other than poor advising, parking problems, and other "instrumental" type issues that one would expect from a group to whom issues of power and control have mostly been hidden.

As time passed, the groups Wednesday night meetings began to get smaller, but the types of issues discussed began more and more to get to the "root" of some of the problems. Thus, much like Dramatists, we were able to begin to "see" the situation for what it is. The group then came to the conclusion that the problem is one of <u>voices</u>: specifically, not enough of them are heard on the campus and in the community. They then decided to establish an alternative campus newspaper, <u>PRAXIS</u>, the mission statement of which reads:

<u>PRAXIS</u> is dedicated to the promotion of a democratic

space for the expression of alternative and historically marginalized voices. PRAXIS is a collective grassroots student newspaper guided by:

1. a sense of social justice.
2. standards of fairness and accuracy.
3. an ongoing critique of relations of power in society.

The grassroots collective has the right to uphold the values embedded in the mission statement.

When Dramatism is employed as a liberating tool, it can result in the kind of project as that described above. When employed as an oppressive tool, it is content to merely point out what is happening on the "bank floor."

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